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TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [MR](#)
SUBJECT: UNHCR REPRESENTATIVES PROPOSE WAY FORWARD ON
MAURITANIAN REFUGEE SITUATION IN SENEGAL

REF: A. NOUAKCHOTT 87

[1](#)B. NOUAKCHOTT 605

Classified By: Ambassador Joseph LeBaron, 1.4(b)(d)

(C) Key Points

-- In a May 19 meeting with representatives of the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), Ambassador encouraged UNHCR to work more closely with Mauritania in a bilateral effort to resolve the refugee issue, rather than continuing to internationalize the issue.

-- Mauritania had a long history of working closely and cooperatively with UN institutions, Ambassador said. UNHCR should build on that history, while paying close attention to Mauritania's oft-repeated public position that the refugee issue is a Mauritanian issue, to be resolved by Mauritania.

-- Ambassador said recent public remarks by Col. Fal during trips to southern and northern Mauritania suggested that Mauritania was increasingly willing to start taking (long overdue) steps to address the refugee issue, Ambassador said.

--- The senior UNHCR representative at the meeting, Assistant Commissioner for Protection Erika Feller, appeared receptive to these proposals. As a first step, UNHCR will explore sending a technical team to the Senegal River region to conduct an accurate census and identification of the refugees living in Senegal.

-- The meeting also touched on illegal immigration to Spain. Feller said this was "not a refugee problem but has a refugee component."

(C) Comments

-- There has been a gradual progression of openness on the part of the Mauritians regarding the highly sensitive refugee issue in Senegal.

-- We believe UNHCR can play a key role in helping Mauritania and the refugees.

-- The role of the international community should be to reinforce UNHCR's message to the Mauritania's transitional government, and Ambassador will weigh in as appropriate in support of UNHCR.

End Key Points and Comments.

¶1. (SBU) UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner for Protection Erika Feller, accompanied by Mr. Radhouane Nouicer of UNHCR Geneva and Head of Mission for UNHCR Didier Laye called on the Ambassador May 19 to discuss the situation regarding illegal migration from Mauritania to Spain.

Mauritanian Refugees in Senegal

¶2. (C) Historically, the UNHCR has approached the subject of the Mauritanian refugees in Senegal by trying to engage the Mauritians, Senegalese and the refugees in tripartite discussions. They have attempted to engage Senegalese and Mauritanian officials in their countries and in Geneva, but UNHCR has met with hesitation and refusals by the Mauritians. Laye added that part of the failure stems from the fact that the Senegalese do not want co-responsibility in the repatriation of these refugees.

¶3. (C) Ambassador encouraged Commissioner Feller to try a new tactic. Ambassador recommended that UNHCR try working bilaterally with Nouakchott rather than internationalizing the situation.

¶4. (C) Feller and Laye said that one critical area in which the UNHCR could play a role is in establishing a technical team in the Senegal River region. The objective would be for Mauritians to solve a Mauritanian problem. Recently, there has been a new openness on the part of the Mauritanian government to discuss this situation.

¶5. (C) Feller and Laye both believe that there needs to be an accurate census and an identification of the refugees living in Senegal. They recently approached the Mauritanian Prime Minister and were encouraged that he did not say &no.8 They wondered if there is a way for "an uncomplicated return" and if they would receive "effective citizenship" and how will this impact the upcoming elections.

Illegal Migration to Spain

¶6. (C) The UNCHR recently conducted a regional meeting for North Africa and Mediterranean Europe covering the situation of asylum seekers and refugees, particularly those transiting Mauritania. The meeting produced a 10-point plan on the better management of this situation. Feller believed that this was "not a refugee problem but has a refugee component." She will take her ideas back to the High Commissioner.

¶7. (C) Feller believed that most of the people that are migrating are not relevant to the UNHCR but some come from refugee-producing countries and use that for a base for an asylum claim. She stated "most of these people are economically motivated illegal migrants and the press is confusing this issue by using the term refugee."

¶8. (C) However, there are a small percentage of refugees and this is why the UNHCR is involved. Feller stated "they must create a system that can categorize who is and who is not a refugee and then be involved with information campaigns in countries of origin." According to Feller, when there are mixed migration groups it can impact genuine refugees because they are caught in an "illegal migrant net." According to Feller, the UNHCR is helping Portugal and Spain to create solutions to this problem.
LeBaron